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VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING AS A TOOL FOR IMPROVING SECONDARY EDUCATION IN BIH – THE TEACHERS’ PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

The most important objective of education system of a country is utilizing the knowledge that would enable systematic economic and social growth. Accordingly, the key education stakeholders have to connect and harmonize education with all society segments. One such initiative, the EU Vocational Education and Training Project (EU VET), was implemented in BiH. Its main goal is improvement of secondary vocational education and students’ competitiveness on the labor market. This research was aimed to assess the benefits that the EU VET introduced in BiH, and to assess its connection with the labor market, all from the perspective of the teaching staff. To properly address research objectives, a questionnaire was developed and sent out to 340 teachers from the F BiH, yielding 275 valid responses. The research results confirmed that the EU VET project had a positive impact on education system in BiH. However, the research also revealed that the educational actors have no analytical capacities necessary for harmonizing the curriculum with the labor market needs.

Keywords: Vocational Education and Training, EU VET, Secondary Education, Labor Market

1. INTRODUCTION

The Right to education is one of the basic human rights. The more a country is developed the more smoothly its education system functions, thus giving a better chance to its citizens to gain and utilize the knowledge. National education system should help pupils and students to have better lives and to improve their well-being (White, 2002). Well-designed education system will ensure country’s competitiveness in the global market, and only the proper link between the education and all other segments of society ensures economic development, social wellbeing, political stability, and social cohesion (Visan, 2018).

All of the above mentioned requires proper communication and cooperation between all actors who may contribute to the education system development. In order to meet the growing needs, the EU countries permanently advance education system and corresponding curricula, thus ensuring easy transformation of the peoples’ competencies necessary for very frequent changes of

the labor market needs. A particular attention is given to secondary vocational education and lifelong learning. For that purposes, the EU countries developed the EU Vocational Education and Training Project – EU VET (EC, 2002).

Instead of being a developmental factor, education system in BiH became a tool for political confrontations and it is presented as a crucial mean of ethnic identity by actual political parties and politicians. To change such circumstances and to make improvements in education system, BiH Council of Ministers has accepted the EU initiative on development and implementation of the EU VET project in BiH (Official Gazette of BiH 65/07, 2007a).

In the light of what has been said, this research aimed to analyze effects of the EU VET project on the overall education system in the F BiH, and to assess the improvements achieved, all from the perspective of teaching staff. Accordingly, the main research objectives are as follows:

- to assess the degree of improvement in education system in BiH that was achieved by the EU VET introduction; and
- to analyze the connection and alignment between the education system and labor market in BiH.

The following section reviews the literature related to the Vocational Education and Training (VET), both in the EU countries and BiH. The third section describes the data and methods used in the analysis, and give a detailed report about the results obtained. The paper ends with some concluding remarks about the study findings.

2. THEORETICAL OVERVIEW

2.1. Overview of the EU VET Project

The rationale behind the EU VET project (EC, 2002) is the effort of EU members to respond to the changes of economic and social circumstances through development of modern, flexible and needs-based educational system. The project is meant to be responsive to the labor market needs and harmonized with existing education system in order to ensure qualitative lifelong learning principles.

The EU VET became a referential mean for setting the transparency of diplomas and qualifications of vocational education. Building on this, the EU Council adopted the resolution on enhanced cooperation in vocational education and training (The Council of the European Union, 2003) that invites the EU members, candidates and EFTA-EEA countries (European Free Trade Association-European Economic Area) to promote cooperation in vocational education and training. All of this was preceded by the adoption of Copenhagen Declaration in November 2002 (EC, 2002), which has set priorities in enhanced vocational education and training, and has created a firm ground for improving the quality and attractiveness of vocational education and training.

The next step in improving and spreading the EU VET was the Maastricht Communiqué in 2004 (EC, 2004). This communiqué encouraged the increase of public-private investments in the EU VET, development of the EU VET for disadvantaged people, and promoting of continual competencies development of the EU VET teachers and trainers. Afterwards, the Bruges Communiqué (EMVET, 2010), which built on Maastricht Communiqué and the EU VET achievements, have developed the long-term strategic objectives for the period 2010-2020.

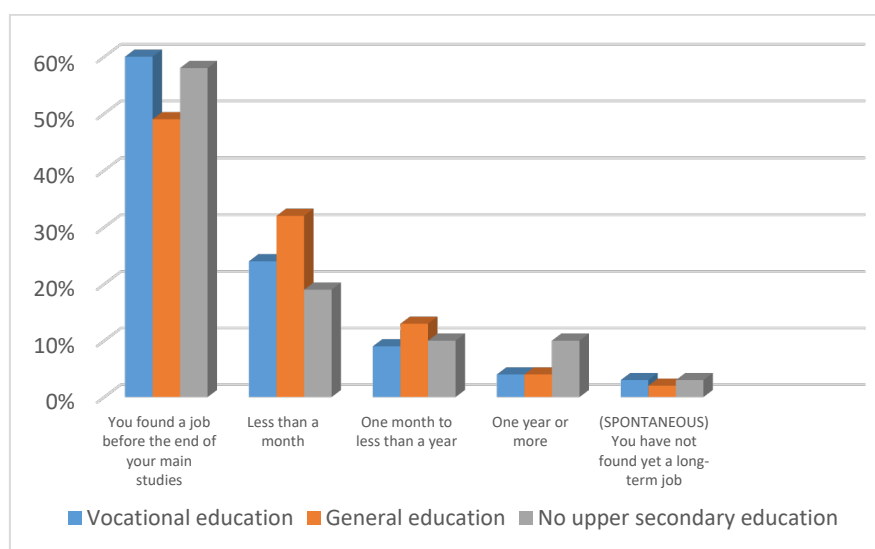
Although the EU VET cannot solve variety of demanding socio-economical needs on its own, it significantly contributes to the fulfilling these needs. According to the European Trade Union Committee for Education, the main goal of the EU VET project is the creation of professional labor force that would actively contribute to the overall society development (ETUCE, 2012). The project also prepares young people for easier move from schools to employment and/or to higher education. In addition, the project addresses lifelong learning issue through people's re-skilling,

upgrading their knowledge and skills, and introducing them to completely new skills. Finally, the EU VET sets common rules that guarantee the recognition of competences in all participating countries.

2.1.1. The Effectiveness of the EU VET

European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP) conducted Opinion survey on vocational education and training in Europe in 2016 (Cedefop, 2017). The survey, consisted of more than 35,000 interviews conducted in 15 EU countries, focused on data collection on European's opinions about awareness, attractiveness and effectiveness of vocational education and training in the EU.

Arguably the most important issues addressed by the survey are outcome and effectiveness of the EU VET. The survey results showed that VET has positive labor market outcome, and that VET graduates at upper secondary level find a job more quickly than their peers from the general upper secondary level. Namely, 60% of VET graduates found their first job before completing the studies, while only 49% of general education students found the job for the same period (Figure 1).



Source: Cedefop European public opinion survey on vocational education and training, Cedefop research paper, No 62, 2017.

Figure 1 Time lapse before finding a job

The results of another CEDEFOP survey indicated that effects the EU VET has on the labor market vary across the EU countries (Cedefop, 2013). Nevertheless, the period of getting the first job of the EU VET graduates is significantly shorter than the general education graduates. This difference may be partially explained by the fact that the general education graduates choose to continue the education more often. However, the EU VET students, who attended work-based programs, are likely to get the first job before the ones who attended the school-based programs. Furthermore, the EU VET graduates tend to keep their current job much longer in comparison with the general education graduates. Although the EU VET graduates get the first job easier and those jobs are more stable and appropriate, this ratio shrinks as the time between graduation and getting the first job increases (Cedefop, 2013).

Even though one can find a lot of sources in existing literature that confirm effectiveness of VET, especially when it comes to fast transition to the gainful employment (e.g. Eichhorst *et al.*,

2015; Gericke, 2017), there are several challenges that vocational education faces. Namely, due to the constant economic changes, an advantage of vocational education becomes a disadvantage expressed as reduction of employment opportunities for older population (Hanushek *et al.*, 2011). Next, in order to ensure operational efficiency of VET programs, significant investments are needed for educational infrastructure improvement and advanced trainings for the teaching and administrative staff (Boutsiouki, 2015). Finally, VET is appropriate only for some specific job types. For high-tech sector as well as for reaching higher-level managerial positions general education is much more suited (Eichhorst *et al.*, 2015).

2.2. Overview of Education System in Bosnia and Herzegovina

The Ministry of Civil Affairs of Bosnia and Herzegovina (MCA BiH) provides the framework for organizing education system along with corresponding framework laws, and ensures that international standards are incorporated into these framework laws. The other government levels are obliged to adopt the education legislations based on this framework and corresponding framework laws. The jurisdiction over the education in BiH is given by the constitutions to different government levels (entities, cantons, and Brčko District). These government levels are responsible for organizing education system (funding, enrolment policy, schools' curricula...) and adoption of all corresponding legislation.

The Framework Law on Primary and Secondary Education in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Official Gazette of BiH 18/03, 2003) describes the elements of quality assurance in education. In accordance with this Law, each level of government in BiH is responsible to enact the regulations and by-laws that ensure the quality of education system. In addition, two agencies – the Agency for Preschool, Primary, and Secondary Education (APOSO) and the Agency for Standards and Grading (ASG), are in charge for establishing standards in the field of knowledge (Official Gazette of BiH 88/07, 2007b). Relevant bodies for ensuring the quality of education are ministries of education and pedagogical institutes.

Financing of secondary education in BiH (public schools) is ensured from public funds on different levels of government (Official Gazette of BiH 18/03, 2003). Therefore, the education system in BiH is fragmented into 13 different authority centers (with 13 different budgets), which are loosely linked and synchronized by the central authoritative body at the state level. In addition, education is seen as a huge budget spender, yet the available funds are sufficient only for basic operational costs. As a consequence, funds for the research and development purposes do not exist on the permanent basis, so it is difficult to have a coherent and systematic approach to the very important education issues in BiH.

2.3. The EU VET Project in BiH

The proper implementation of the EU VET project should have ensured a modern, flexible and high-quality VET system in BiH, thus ensuring the process of lifelong learning and the opportunity for personal participation in job creation. This system should be responsive to the labor market needs and well-integrated with the primary and general secondary school system, as well as with the higher education systems based on lifelong learning principles.

In order to accommodate implementation of the EU VET project, the Parliamentary Assembly of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the MCA BiH have brought the supporting strategic documents on a state level (Official Gazette of BiH 65/07, 2007a; Official Gazette of BiH 63/08, 2008). These documents elaborate on the context of VET development, the managerial and financial issues related to VET, the development of teachers' competencies, the curricula and grading system, and the adult education.

Since its introduction, the EU VET Project in BiH has gone through several phases (Corradini *et al.*, 2012). The first phase was introduced in early 2000s, when an important strategic document for the EU VET reform in BiH, so called “White paper”, was adopted (Education Authorities in BiH, 2003). This document established the common ground for development of the curriculum, diplomas and qualifications, as well as the grading system and criteria.

The second phase, the EU VET II, required establishment of the Pilot Advisory Council for secondary vocational education and training that was the State expert body for development of vocational education and training in BiH. The Council created the “Strategy for Vocational Education and Training Development 2007 – 2013”, which was adopted by the BiH Council of Ministers (Official Gazette of BiH 65/07, 2007a). The main achievement of the EU VET II were development of several manuals (for labor market, for teachers’ training, IT for EU VET) that are necessary for applying the EU VET system.

The EU VET III phase has ensured continuation of structural changes and amendments in order to ensure consistency of the process. During this phase, the project focused on improvement of schools’ managements, teachers’ trainings, standards of modular curricula, and the EU VET schools’ financing. The EU VET IV, the fourth phase of the project, continued the trend of the EU VET III. Standards and curricula for ten additional vocations were developed, while many of existing vocational curricula were revised in order to get it closer to the labor market demands.

2.3.1. The Effectiveness of EU VET Project in BiH

The Ministry of Civil Affairs of Bosnia and Herzegovina, in its report on implementation of the VET strategy in BiH (MCA BiH, 2014), have found that the connection between the vocational education and labor market is very weak. The ministries of education communicate and cooperate mostly with the employment bureaus, while the communication with business and craft representatives is sporadic.

On the other hand, the employers consider that the EU VET schools are quite slow in adjusting to the needs of the labor market. The main problem, which is recognized in the report (MCA BiH, 2014), is the practical teaching. Namely, a sound cooperation between the employers and vocational schools in organizing the practical teaching does not exist. While the government bodies claim that the employers are not interested in organizing practical teaching, the employers think that the existing education system cannot be influenced or changed by them.

According to Corradini and associates (2012), the main problem of VET in BiH is a lack of opportunities for getting the social partners and stakeholders together in order to make a systematic approach to VET. One way to make a positive move toward harmonization of the vocational education and the labor market needs would be establishment of the tripartite advisory councils, as it was proposed by the Framework Law on VET (Official Gazette of BiH 63/08, 2008). These councils should stimulate dialogue among the relevant stakeholders, which, consequently, would have positive impact on harmonizing the enrolment policy with the labor market needs and better youth employment (MCA BiH, 2014).

3. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

To get a deeper insight into the research topics, an appropriate survey questionnaire was developed, and sent to 340 teachers from 11 schools that are located in seven cantons in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. A total of 275 valid responses (80.88%) were received.

The majority of the participating teachers (44%) have between 11 and 25 years of working experience, 22.55% of them have more than 25 years of working experience, and 33.45% have less than ten years of working experience. Furthermore, almost half of the participating teachers teach

on vocational subjects (49.09%), while slightly more than a half of the participating teachers (54.90%) were women.

The estimated population of the secondary school teachers in the F BiH is about 8600 (FIDP, 2018), so the expected statistical error is around 6% (95% confidence level). The teachers that have participated in the survey were coming from different schools, which are proportionally distributed among different cantons from the F BiH.

3.1. Results

There are two specific objectives that was addressed with the data analysis in this research:

1. To test teachers' opinion and stance regarding the effects of the EU VET on the overall education system improvement in BiH.
2. To test teachers' opinion and stance regarding the schools' capacities and willingness to align themselves with the labor market needs.

One major expectation from the EU VET project implementation is its contribution to the general improvement of the secondary education in BiH. A great majority of the participating teachers (60.8%) agreed that this objective was achieved, while only 13.8% of them disagree with such project outcome. However, every fourth respondent is not sure if the EU VET brings any improvement in the secondary education (Figure 2).

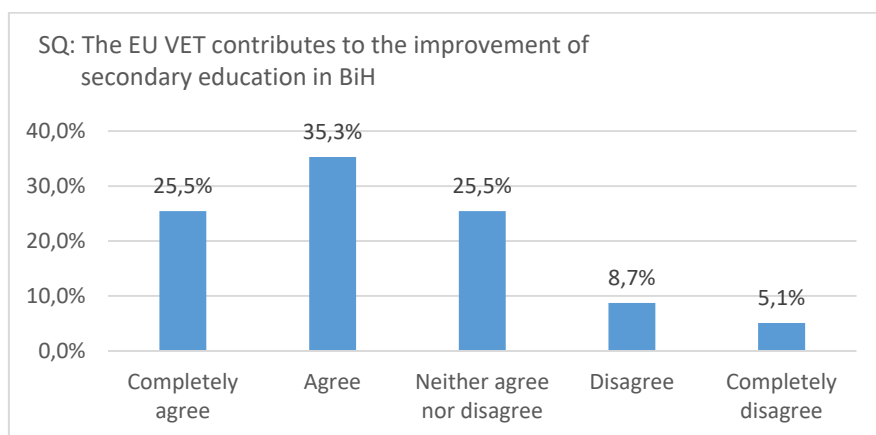


Figure 2 The EU VET contribution to the education improvement (N = 275)

The question of general outcome of two different curricula – VET and traditional, was also addressed by the survey. Accordingly, 56.8% of the participating teachers consider the modular curriculum more advanced than the traditional, one fourth of them are not sure, while only 17.5% disagree with that (Figure 3).

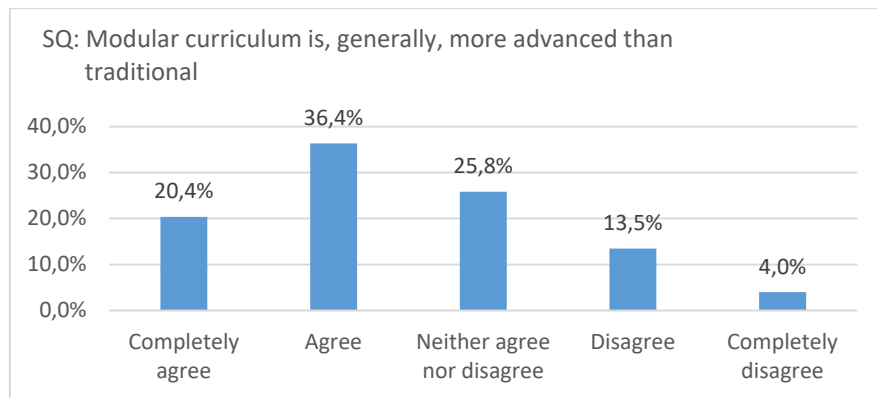


Figure 3 Advantage of the EU VET over traditional program (N = 275)

Yet another important objective of the EU VET project is to develop such a skills set that would significantly increase students' chances to get a job. A half of the participating teachers (49.5%) believe that the EU VET graduates are more competitive at the labor market, 32% of them were not sure, and 18.5% teachers think that the EU VET graduates are not more competitive (Figure 4).

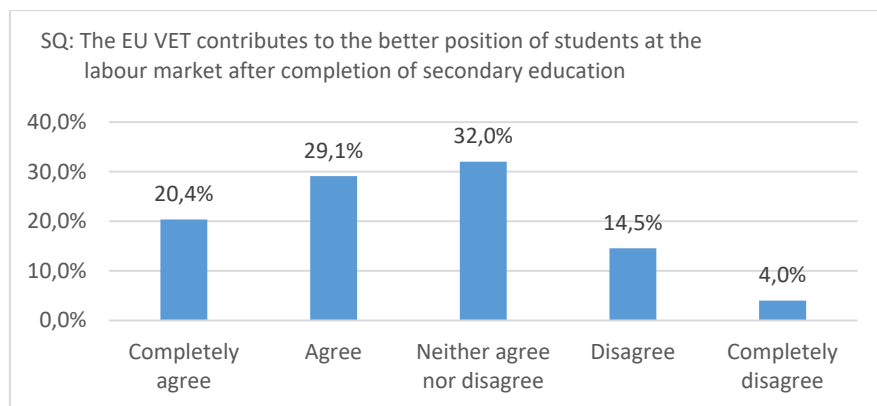


Figure 4 The EU VET graduates competitiveness at the labor market (N = 275)

A consistent implementation of the EU VET implies permanent teachers' capacity building. Asked about that, only 27.6% of the participating teachers have responded positively, while 40.3% of them have responded that teachers do not have the necessary knowledge and analytical capacities (Figure 5).

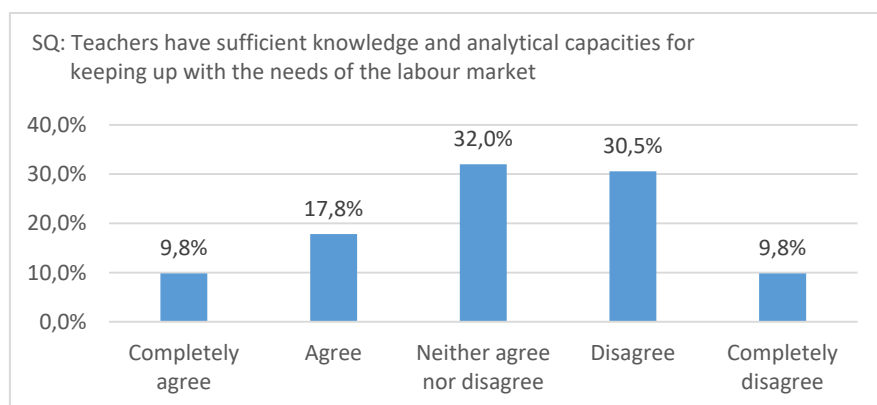


Figure 5 Teachers' organizational and analytical capacities (N = 275)

More than a half of the participating teachers (51.3%) think that schools do not possess autonomy level necessary for adequate and prompt response to the social and market changes. At the same time, only one fifth of them (20.4%) have an opposite opinion (Figure 6).

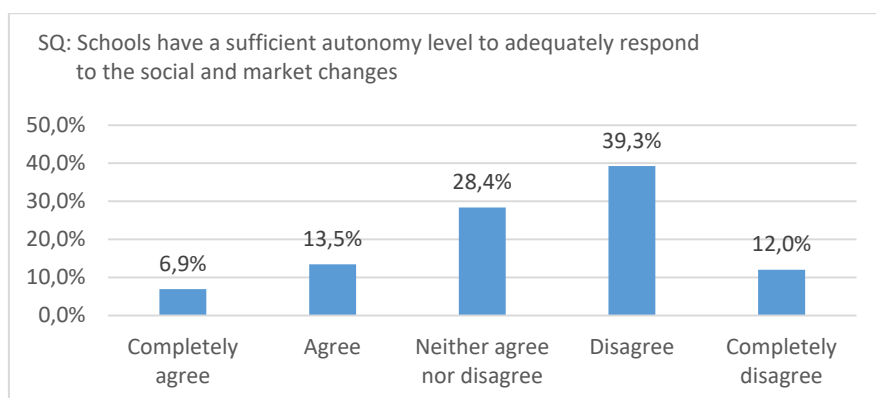


Figure 6 Schools' autonomy level (N = 275)

Quality of education should not depend only on schools, but there should exist close cooperation between the key stakeholders in education. According to the participating teachers, this kind of cooperation is far from the desired. Only 21.8% of the them believe there exist a proper cooperation and communication among the relevant stakeholders, while 46.2% of them disagree (Figure 7).

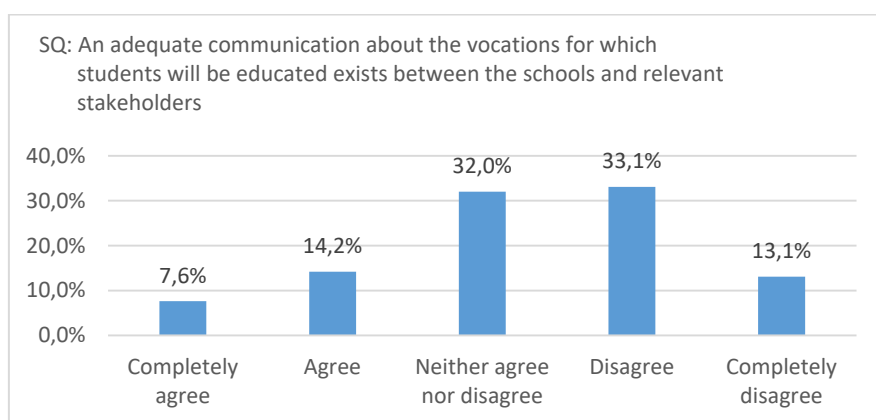


Figure 7 Communication between relevant stakeholders (N = 275)

3.2. Results Interpretation and Discussion

The research was based on collecting and analyzing the survey data, in order to meet the previously stated research objectives. As the data analysis results show, half of the teachers believe that the EU VET graduates are more competitive at labor market then the general education graduates, which is, arguably, the most important schooling outcome. At the same time, almost one third of them are not sure about that (Figure 4). This, rather high level of uncertainty is caused by the inexistent information sharing between the schools, employment bureaus, employers and ministries of education. Even though the reliable information does not exist, the prevailing opinion of survey respondents is that the EU VET graduates are more competitive at the labor market than other graduates.

Directly asked about the effects of the EU VET project, almost two thirds of participating teachers responded that the EU VET has positively contributed the improvement of education system in BiH (Figure 2). Furthermore, a particularly appreciated novelty, which the EU VET introduced in the secondary vocational curriculum, is the modular methodology. Consequently, a great majority of the participating teachers agrees that the modular curriculum is more advanced than traditional curriculum (Figure 3).

Although one quarter of participating teachers were undecided on the positive effects of the EU VET project, the fact is that two out of three teachers consider the EU VET rather purposeful. Combining that with the perception about the EU VET graduates labor market competitiveness, it can be asserted, with sufficient certainty, that the EU VET project had a positive impact on education system in BiH.

However, as usual, there is another side to this story. The labor market is a very dynamic system, where the circumstances and needs are changed quite often. The EU VET strives to respond to those changes and demands through harmonization of the curricula with the identified labor market needs. In order to achieve such a harmonization, successfully and in timely manner, the schools should possess the adequate analytical capacities, as well as a favorable legal, professional, and social environment.

The research results showed that rather high number of teachers thinks the schools and schools' staffs have no necessary analytical capacities to keep up with the labor market needs (Figure 5). In addition, more than a half of the participating teachers think that schools do not possess the autonomy to adequately respond to the social and market changes (Figure 6).

Harmonization of the EU VET curriculum and the labor market requires permanent and high-quality communication and cooperation between the main stakeholders (schools, public administration, employers, and employment bureaus). The research results, however, have revealed that such communication and cooperation does not really exist (Figure 7). The participating teachers mostly have expressed an opinion that the communication and cooperation among the main stakeholders is, generally, very weak.

Everything being taken into account, it can be concluded that the necessary analytical capacities and adequate environment for successful alignment between schools and the labor market do not exist. The same could be asserted even for the willingness factor.

3.2.1. Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

There are a few different limitations that apply to this research. Nevertheless, the most important limitation is that all collected data come from one interest group (stakeholder) in the education realm. Although that is, arguably, the most important interest group, which is deeply involved within the research field, the obtained results could not be generalized for the secondary education system as a whole.

Thus, in order to validate findings of this research and make it more general, another dataset, from other important stakeholders, should be obtained and analyzed in the same or similar way. Besides, a comparative analysis between different stakeholders would provide a further insight in the research topics. Consequently, an important recommendation for the future research would be to extend the study on other (all) stakeholders of the education system.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The quality of education depends mainly on the interest of key decision makers in a country, which is reflected through the proper legislation and policy development, fair and sufficient funds allocation, and introduction of changes based on the lessons learned. BiH authorities accepted the

proposal to introduce a new way of teaching in secondary vocational school by introducing the EU VET project. This process included adoption of the strategies and necessary legal framework that stimulate vocational education and training in BiH. International Community provided BiH authorities with sufficient financial and expert support.

This study aims to explore teachers' opinions and stance regarding the effects of the EU VET project on the overall education system in the F BiH, as well as about schools' organizational and analytical capacities for harmonization with the labor market needs.

The research results confirmed that the EU VET project is purposeful and applicable in BiH. It clearly introduced a new way of teaching that puts development of students' skills and competencies in the focus, which brings the EU VET graduates in better position for getting a job after completion of secondary education. Yet, the space for improvement is huge. These improvements could be done through the systematic capacity building of education staff, and establishment of the dialogue and cooperation with the relevant stakeholders, all in order to harmonize the education with the labor market needs. Applying the mentioned recommendations would require commitment of all actors and strong political will.

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